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SIR THOMAS BROWNE.

AMONG those "never-failing friends" of old with whom it is both a profit and a pleasure to "converse day by day," few welcome us in tones of more genial sympathy than Sir Thomas Browne. His title to our enduring affection rests not so much in the profundity of his erudition and the ubiquity of his fancy, or in the pompous eloquence of his sonorous style, as in the hearty friendliness of his tone. In him we admire not so much the writer as the man. He belongs to the class of mystical soliloquists who love to discourse to themselves about fantastic subtleties too fine to excite the interest or even the curiosity of vulgar minds; but who yet are not too egotistic to allow the "friendly reader" to overhear their musings. They love to "turn the world round" not only for their own, but also for others' "recreation;" and to lead others with them through a labyrinth of fancy until both author and reader "lose themselves in a mystery." The work of such spirits, to whom literature is not so much a profession as a recreative exercise, must necessarily be lacking in design—uneven, whimsical, and capricious; but at the same time it greatly gains in the charm of ingenuous sincerity.

Dr. Johnson, in his biographical sketch, narrowly fails to see how a life so placid and seemingly uneventful as Browne's can have appeared to Sir Thomas "a miracle of thirty years, which, to relate, were not a history but a piece of poetry, and would sound to common ears like a fable." A man's subjective existence, however, may be filled with an almost miraculous communion with the invisible spirits of the universe; while the uninitiated observer of his objective life, "perusing only his outside," may "err in his altitude." Johnson, prosaic and pedantic as he was, could never appreciate the essential poetry of a life like that of Sir Thomas Browne. If we wish to understand its "miraculous" quality, we need no other evidence than that of our author's works. The "Religio

Medici" will tell us more than all of the biographical data which have come down to us; and the "Urn-Burial" and the "Garden of Cyrus" will give us a more glowing picture of their author's personality than even the minute observations of his friend, Mr. Whitefoot, who "esteemed it an especial favor of providence to have had a particular acquaintance with him for two-thirds of his life." With Sir Thomas Browne, the work is the man.

Our author was born in London on October 19, 1605, in the parish of St. Michael, Cheapside. His father, who had been a mercer at Upton, in Cheshire, seems to have come of an ancient and honorable family; and, if we may believe one fanciful anecdote, for which we have the excellent authority of Sir Thomas's own daughter, Elizabeth Littleton, he was endowed with not a little of that poetic reverence which later characterized his illustrious son. When the infant boy was sleeping, his father, we are told, was in the habit of uncovering the child's breast, kissing it, and praying, as was said of Origen's father, "that the Holy Ghost would take possession there." Thus early was Sir Thomas consecrated to a life in which there was to be nothing base; and surely it is not an evidence of over-fanciful credulity to imagine that there was something of efficacy in the father's prayer.

From the guardianship of his son the elder Browne was early cut off by the hand of death; and his widow soon married Sir Thomas Dutton, leaving the boy, with a patrimony of six thousand pounds, to the care of rapacious guardians. Sir Thomas received his early education at Winchester College, and in 1623 was sent as a fellow-commoner to Broadgate Hall (now Pembroke College), Oxford. Here he was graduated B.A. on June 31, 1626, and received the degree of M.A. on June 11, 1629. Becoming interested in the natural sciences, Browne devoted most of his time at Oxford to the study of medicine, and for some time after his graduation practiced his chosen profession in Oxfordshire. Later on he was induced to accompany his stepfather to Ireland on a tour of inspection, which the latter was commissioned to make, of its forts and castles. After this preliminary tour,

Sir Thomas continued his travels through France and Italy, staying for some time at the celebrated schools of physic at Montpellier and Padua, and doubtless acquiring some of the "six languages" which, "besides the jargon and patois of several provinces," he later tells us that he understood. On his way back to England he journeyed through Holland, where, in 1633, the University of Leyden conferred upon him the degree of Doctor of Medicine. Returning to his native land, he established himself as a physician at Shipden Hall, near Halifax; from which, in 1637, he was induced to move to Norwich by the importunities of his friends, Sir Nicholas Bacon, Sir Charles Le Gros, and Drs. Lushington and Lewin. The same year, on July 10, he was incorporated Doctor of Physic at Oxford; and, as we learn from his friend Whitefoot, was soon "much resorted to for his skill in physic."

It was probably during the leisure moments of his residence at Shipden Hall that Sir Thomas composed the beautiful contemplative soliloquy which we know as the "Religio Medici." I have already noted the passage in which he speaks of his life as a "miracle of *thirty* years," and in the address to the reader prefixed to the edition of 1643 he says that he composed the work "about seven years past." These two passages fix the date of the treatise at 1635-36. It is easy to believe Sir Thomas's assertion that it was written for his "private exercise and satisfaction," and was not intended for publication. There are reveries in it which seem almost too intimate and precious for the ear of the general public, and the naïve self-revelation of the whole work affords a striking contrast to the more dignified reserve which characterizes the treatises which he later prepared directly for the press. But Sir Thomas was too great a believer in the community of learning to make his treatise, to use his own words, a "grave" rather than a "treasury" of his reflections. He submitted the manuscript to one of his faithful friends; and soon, as the fashion was in those days, it went the rounds of a circle of literary enthusiasts. "Being communicated to one," Sir Thomas tells us, "it became common property unto many, and was by transcription suc-

cessively corrupted, until it arrived in a most depraved copy at the press." I cannot agree with Dr. Johnson in doubting the author's express statement that the first edition, brought out by Andrew Crooke in 1642, was surreptitiously issued; although the fact that the first authorized edition was produced by the same publisher seems to support his contention. Even in its corrupted condition, the work immediately attracted public attention, as Dr. Johnson tells us, "by the novelty of paradoxes, the dignity of sentiment, the quick succession of images, the multitude of abstruse allusions, the subtlety of disquisition, and the strength of language."

Sir Kenelm Digby, who is described by Lord Clarendon as "a person very eminent and notorious throughout the whole course of his life, from his cradle to his grave," eagerly read the work and in twenty-four hours penned a series of elaborate "Observations" upon its contents, which also was soon circulated in manuscript. Hearing that these "Observations" were about to appear in print, Browne wrote to their author requesting him to withhold them until the appearance of the "true and intended original" of the "*Religio Medici*," which he was then preparing to publish in order to abrogate the errors of the unauthorized edition. Digby replied in very courteous terms, promising to withhold his "Observations" until the revised edition appeared; but his printer failed to do so, and the two were published almost simultaneously in 1643. The "*Religio Medici*" at once became immensely popular, both at home and abroad. In 1664, John Merryweather published a Latin version of the treatise; and Dutch, French, and German translations appeared in 1665, 1668, and 1680 respectively. The "daring skepticism" which, as Mr. Bullen has said, is combined in this treatise with "implicit faith in revelation," attracted the condemnation of Alexander Ross in a now-forgotten pamphlet entitled "*Medicus Medicatus*," and won it the honor of being placed in the "*Index Expurgatorius*" of the Church of Rome. Between 1642 and 1881, the treatise ran through thirty-three English editions.

In the second part of the "*Religio Medici*," Sir Thomas

had whimsically derided the state of marriage. "The whole world was made for man," he had said, "but the twelfth part of man for woman. Man is the whole world and the breath of God; woman, the rib and crooked piece of man. I could be content that we might procreate like trees, without conjunction, or that there were any way to perpetuate the world without this trivial and vulgar way of coition." It is not surprising, therefore, that he attracted no little raillery from his satirical contemporaries when, in 1641, he married Dorothy, the fourth daughter of Edward Mileham, of Burlingham St. Peter. If we may believe the words of his friend Whitefoot, however, we may be sure that Sir Thomas had no trivial reason for his sudden change of opinion. She was a "lady," the good parson tells us, "of such symmetrical proportion to her worthy husband, both in the graces of her body and mind, that they seemed to come together by a kind of natural magnetism." Their married life was long and happy, the Lady Dorothy bearing her husband twelve children and surviving him three years.

Of the peaceful life of the cheery household at Norwich we gain many illuminative suggestions from the domestic correspondence included by Simon Wilkin in his complete edition of the works of Sir Thomas Browne (London: W. Pickering—1835-6, 4 vols.). Four of Sir Thomas's children seem to have been especially dear to him. His son Edward shared his own scientific leanings, and later became an able physician; his daughter Anne married a grandson of Lord Fairfax; and Elizabeth, who was one of the most zealous in preparing her father's unprinted manuscripts for posthumous publication, became the wife of Maj. George Littleton. But his second son, Thomas, seems to have been the darling of his heart. He was a youth of rare spirit and unusual promise, whom Sir Thomas sent, at the very early age of fourteen, unaccompanied, on a tour through France. Later on the lad entered the navy—an occupation well suited to the dashing energy of his nature. But the boy died young, and left an emptiness in his father's heart which could never be filled.

During the long years of Sir Thomas's residence at Norwich, his time was taken up with his medical practice and with the composition of most of his more important works. Throughout the civil wars he remained at heart a Royalist, and ever regretted what he called "the horrid murder of King Charles I." But his unruffled spirit "quietly rested under the drums and trappings" of the revolution, and the thunderous upheaval of his times finds no echo in his works.

Sir Thomas's reputation for learning and research was greatly increased in 1646 by the publication of his elaborate work, "*Pseudodoxia Epidemica*; or, Enquiries into very many received tenets and commonly presumed truths, which examined prove but Vulgar and Common Errors." This treatise, like the "*Religio Medici*," was answered by Alexander Ross, and was translated into Dutch, German, and French. From its encyclopedic scope, we infer that it must have grown to its final extent through many years of slow accretions. It reads like a vast compendium of its author's notes, and is lacking in constructive evolution. It attracted no little attention among scholars, however, by the vast and recondite learning which it displayed; and Sir Thomas's advice and assistance soon became eagerly sought after by scholars engaged in scientific and antiquarian pursuits. He was always ready cheerfully to proffer the desired information.

To this [he tells us in the "*Religio Medici*"] (as calling myself a scholar) I am obliged by the duty of my condition. I make not therefore my head a grave, but a treasury, of knowledge. I intend no monopoly, but a community in learning. I study not for my own sake only, but for theirs that study not for themselves. . . . And, in the midst of all my endeavors, there is but one thought that dejects me—that my required parts must perish with myself, nor can be legacied among my honored friends.

Among the best-known men of the time who sought Sir Thomas's acquaintance was John Evelyn, with whom, in 1658, he began a correspondence which lasted until his death. In October, 1671, Evelyn made a trip to Norwich to visit his learned friend; and he has left us, in his diary, a glowing account of our author's surroundings. The house and garden, he tells us, were "a paradise and cabinet of rarities, and that of the best collections, especially medals, books, plants, and

natural things." Evelyn took particular notice of Browne's extensive collection of birds' eggs. Sir Thomas later showed his friend around the old town and pointed out the various places of antiquarian interest. It must indeed have been a pleasure to enjoy in his own home the delightful hospitality of Sir Thomas Browne, and to hear him chat familiarly about the capricious oddities of natural phenomena and the mysteries of antediluvian lore.

In such surroundings, encircled by his old books and invaluable collections, our author composed in 1658 the solemn and grandiloquent "*Hydriotaphia, Urn-Burial; or, A Discourse of the Sepulchral Urns Lately Found in Norfolk,*" which exhibits at its fullest the luxurious sonority of his style. At the same time he published the most fantastic of his writings, "*The Garden of Cyrus; or, The Quincuncial, Lozenge, or Network Plantations of the Ancients, Artificially, Naturally, Mystically Considered.*"

There is little left to relate of the external events of his life. In December, 1664, he was created *socius honorarius* of the College of Physicians, and received the diploma of the institution on July 6, 1665. On September 28, 1671, he was knighted by Charles II, on the occasion of a royal visit to Norwich.

Although his literary activity remained unabated throughout his life, Sir Thomas published nothing after 1658. He seems toward the close of his life, however, to have intended to print some miscellaneous manuscript tracts which at odd moments he had composed. He died of a sudden attack of colic on his birthday, October 19, 1682, having exactly reached the age of seventy-seven; and was buried in the church of St. Peter Mancroft, Norwich. It seems odd enough that in one of the manuscript tracts which were published after his death ("*The Letter to a Friend, etc.,*" which I shall notice below) Sir Thomas should have commented upon the very unusual circumstance of a man's dying on the anniversary of his nativity.

Nothing is more common with infants [he says] than to die on the day of their nativity, to behold the worldly hours, and but the fractions thereof,

and even to perish before their nativity in the hidden world of the womb, and before their good angel is conceived to undertake them. But in persons who outlive many years, and when there are no less than three hundred and sixty-five days to determine their lives in every year; that the first day should make the last; that the tail of the snake should return into its mouth precisely at that time; and that they should wind up upon the day of their nativity, is indeed a remarkable coincidence, which, though astrology hath taken witty pains to solve, yet hath it been very wary in making predictions of it.

Another of Sir Thomas's mystical precogitations was strangely realized when, in 1840, his body was "knaved out of its grave." It seems that some workmen who were engaged in making a new grave accidentally broke into the vault which contained Sir Thomas Browne's coffin, and fractured the lid with a pickaxe. In this way the skeleton was exposed; and the sexton, with no sacrilegious misgivings, took possession of the skull. It is now, I believe, on exhibition in the pathological museum of the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital. In view of these events we feel an added interest in reading the reveries of the dedication of "Hydriotaphia:"

But who knows the fate of his bones, or how often he is to be buried? Who hath the oracle of his ashes, or whither they are to be scattered?

As I have before noted, "Some Minutes for the Life of Sir Thomas Browne" were drawn up soon after his death by his intimate friend, Rev. John Whitefoot, rector of Heigham, from which we derive some interesting particulars regarding our author's personality. Among other things, he tells us:

For a character of his person, his complexion and hair were answerable to his name; his stature was moderate, and habit of body neither fat nor lean.

In his habit of clothing, he had an aversion to all finery, and affected plainness both in the fashion and ornaments. He ever wore a cloak, or boots, when few others did. He kept himself always very warm, and thought it most safe to do so.

The horizon of his understanding was much larger than the hemisphere of the world. He could tell the number of the visible stars in his horizon, and call them all by their name that had any. He was so curious a botanist that, besides the superficial distinctions, he made nice and elaborate observations, equally useful as entertaining.

His memory, though not so eminent as that of Seneca or Scaliger, was capacious and tenacious, insomuch that he remembered all that was remarkable in any book that he had read, and not only knew all persons

again that he had ever seen at any distance of time, but remembered the circumstances of their bodies and their particular discourses and speeches.

In the Latin poets he remembered everything that was acute and pungent. He had read most of the historians, ancient and modern. He was excellent company when at leisure, and expressed more light than heat in the temper of his brain.

He was never seen to be transported with mirth or dejected with sadness; always cheerful, but rarely merry at any sensible rate; seldom heard to break a jest; and, when he did, he would be apt to blush at the levity of it. His gravity was natural, without affectation.

He was so free from loquacity, or much talkativeness, that he was something difficult to be engaged in any discourse; though when he was so, it was always singular, and never trite or vulgar. Parsimonious in nothing but his time, whereof he made as much improvement with as little loss as any man in it, when he had any to spare from his drudging practice he was scarce patient of any diversion from his studies.

He attended the public service very constantly when he was not withheld by his practice, and never missed the sacrament in his parish if he were in town. He was liberal in his house entertainments and in his charity.

Many of Sir Thomas Browne's manuscript writings were published posthumously. In 1684 his friend Archbishop Tenison brought out a collection of his "Miscellany Tracts" on subjects ranging from the ancient monuments of Norwich to the plants mentioned in the Bible and the fishes eaten by our Saviour with his disciples after his resurrection from the dead. In 1690 his son, Dr. Edward Browne, published his beautiful "Letter to a Friend, upon occasion of the death of his intimate friend," which forms a sort of prelude to the careful dissertation on "Christian morals"—intended perhaps as a continuation of the "Religio Medici"—which was first published in 1716 by Archdeacon Jeffery. A collection of the "Posthumous Works of the Learned Sir Thomas Browne, Knt., M.D., late of Norwich," was published by an unknown editor in 1712. It contains, among other tracts, a striking fragment of an essay on "Dreams."

From this bare chronicle of the outward events of the life of our author, we turn with pleasure to a consideration of his inner life as exhibited in the works which he composed. With Sir Thomas Browne, as I have said, the work is the man; and into his resonant improvisations he has poured all of the "miracle" of his existence. If nothing but his "Pseudodoxia" had survived "the iniquity of oblivion," we should

probably have numbered him among those whimsical fantasists who wasted their efforts on subtleties of learning too trivial to be of serious importance. The "Enquiry into Vulgar Errors" is not a work which we could profitably read in its entirety, however entertaining we might find it on occasionally opening it at random to peruse a few of its chapters. It is not unpleasing to have our attention directed to the absurdity of painting Adam and Eve in Paradise with navels, or to be reminded of long outgrown superstitions in regard to plants and fabulous animals. We are not uninterested in hearing a discussion of the question whether or not men weigh more when dead than when alive, and we are amused at being told of the fallacy of the old tenet that Jews stink; but before long we weary of these "trivial disquisitions." In the "Pseudodoxia," Sir Thomas often sets up men of straw for the sole pleasure of methodically disemboweling them and revealing their soulless shallowness. In spite of its elaborateness and the evident care with which it was prepared for publication, the work is lacking in organic unity. Its chapters do not grow endogenously one from another. It is a vast encyclopedic chaos of recondite lore, which excites our interest rather than our admiration, and bewilders us by the very extent of its voluminous observation.

The opening chapter, which, logically considered, is perhaps the most able portion of the treatise, is occupied with an inquiry into the sources of error not a little resembling Bacon's famous arraignment of "Idols." Sir Thomas denotes as the mainsprings of error "the common infirmity of human nature," "the erroneous disposition of the people," "misapprehension, fallacy, or false deduction, credulity, supineness, adherence unto antiquity, tradition, and authority," and, last but not least, "the endeavors of Satan." Under these heads, he has, as we see, included Bacon's "Idola Tribus," or errors common to the human race; "Idola Fori," or errors restricted to the vulgar mass; and "Idola Theatri," or errors arising from the community of more cultured minds. He has, however, given little space to the consideration of the "Idola Specus;" or, "Idols of the Cave," to those errors

arising from the capricious mental peregrinations which are born of solitary musings. With this last class of errors, Sir Thomas himself was singularly tainted. To a daring skepticism he paradoxically united a conventional credulity. When we see him so delightedly hunting to earth the multitudinous errors which in all ages have enslaved humanity, we are more than surprised to find that he himself still believes in alchemy and astrology, in the literal resurrection of the body, in the discarded Ptolemaic system of astronomy, and in the diabolical mysteries of witchcraft. In the "Religio Medici" he positively asserts, "For my part, I have ever believed, and do now know, that there are witches;" and we are told that his evidence was largely influential in convicting Amy Duny and Rose Cullender of the practice of witchcraft when, in 1664, they were tried before Sir Matthew Hale at Bury Saint Edmunds. In spite of his unfortunate credulity, we may be sure that there was nothing malicious in Sir Thomas's testimony. He seems to have had no true sense of natural law, as Bacon understood it; and in this essential fallacy lies the true weakness of the "Pseudodoxia." Furthermore, the treatise displays few of those harmonious felicities of style which delight us in the more spontaneous of its author's writings; and we are led, therefore, to dismiss it as a work of minor importance.

In the "Garden of Cyrus" is displayed all of the wealth of our author's fancy. It is a dissertation on the quincunx, that geometrical arrangement of five points with which we are familiar in the five of a die or a domino. This subject exercised a peculiar fascination over the mind of Sir Thomas, who, as he tells us, ever "nauseated *crambe* verities and questions overqueried." In dedicating the treatise to his "worthy and honored friend," Nicholas Bacon, he deplores the fact that "the field of knowledge hath been so traced, it is hard to spring anything new." There is certainly a daring novelty in the "Garden of Cyrus," however, which accounts for the selection of so original a theme, not the least of whose excellencies in the eyes of Sir Thomas was that "such discourses

allow excursions, and venially admit of collateral truths, though at some distance from their principals."

He commences by discoursing on the gardens of antiquity, beginning with Paradise, touching on the pensile gardens of Babylon, and coming at last to the gardens of Cyrus, where the trees were planted quincuncially. The quincunx, he tells us, was probably used by Noah in planting his vineyards, and even in Eden the tree of knowledge supplied a center of decussation round which the four corners of the garden were quincuncially arranged. He next pursues the quincunx through all of its applications to the arts. He finds it employed in architecture, in the crowns and even the beds of the ancients, in the array of the Roman battalia and of the Macedonian phalanx, and in the labyrinth of Crete. From artificial he next turns to natural considerations, and finds the quincunx in numberless plants, in the eyes of the insects, the tail of the beaver, the scales of fishes, and the skin of man. Quadrupeds, we learn, even walk quincuncially. The vast learning and the minute observation of natural phenomena which Sir Thomas displays in the course of his discussion are nothing short of marvelous. As Coleridge has remarked, he finds "quincunxes in heaven above, quincunxes in earth below, quincunxes in the mind of man, quincunxes in tones, in optic nerves, in roots of trees, in leaves, in everything."

It is not, however, until he comes to consider the quincunx mystically that he reveals all of the wealth of his ubiquitous fancy, and at the same time cloaks his musings in a garb of smoothly cadenced melody. Note, for example, this eloquent discursus, in which, leaving the quincunx for a moment, he pauses to comment upon light and shadow:

Light that makes things seen makes some things invisible; were it not for darkness and the shadow of the earth, the noblest part of the creation had remained unseen, and the stars in heaven as invisible as on the fourth day, when they were created above the horizon with the sun, or there was not an eye to behold them. The greatest mystery of religion is expressed by adumbration, and in the noblest part of Jewish types we find the cherubim shadowing the mercy seat. Life itself is but the shadow of death, and souls departed but the shadows of the living. All things fall under this name. The sun itself is but the dark *simulacrum*, and light but the shadow of God.

He reminds us of Montaigne in the subversive enjoyment which he not infrequently displays, of the far-reaching originality of his reflections; and it is in this semi-ironical, semi-poetical mood that he pens the famous concluding passage of his work. He has been writing far into the night, with no witness to the lonely pleasure of his improvisation, until at last the sinking constellations warn him that it is time to yield to the lullings of sleep. As if loath to quit his reflections without a swan-song of fanciful poetry, he breaks into this eloquent peroration:

But the quincunx¹ of heaven runs low, and it is time to close the five ports of knowledge. We are unwilling to spin out our awaking thoughts into the phantasms of sleep, which often continueth precogitations, making cables of cobwebs and wildernesses of handsome groves. Beside, Hippocrates hath spoke so little, and the oneirocritical masters have left such frigid interpretations from plants, that there is little encouragement to dream of paradise itself. Nor will the sweetest delight of gardens afford much comfort in sleep, wherein the dullness of that sense shakes hands with delectable odors, and, though in the bed of Cleopatra, can hardly with any delight raise up the ghost of a rose.

Night, which pagan theology would make the daughter of Chaos, affords no advantage to the description of order; although no lower than that mass can we derive its genealogy. All things began in order, so shall they end, and so shall they begin again, according to the Ordainer of order and mystical mathematics of the city of heaven.

Though Somnus in Homer be sent to rouse up Agamemnon, I find no such effects in these drowsy approaches of sleep. To keep our eyes open longer were but to act our antipodes. The huntsmen are up in America, and they are already past their first sleep in Persia. But who can be drowsy at that hour which freed us from everlasting sleep? or have slumbering thoughts at that time, when sleep itself must end, and, as some conjecture, all shall wake again?

"Think you," wrote Coleridge, on the margin opposite this passage, "that there was ever such a reason given before for going to bed at midnight—to wit, that if we did not we should be 'acting the part of our antipodes?' And then, 'The huntsmen are up in America!' What life, what fancy! Does the whimsical knight give us thus the essence of gunpowder tea, and call it an opiate?"

With its perennial unexpectedness of style, the "Garden of Cyrus" certainly abounds in passages which thrill the reader

¹Hyades, then near the horizon at midnight.

with æsthetic pleasure; but after all, the treatise is more entertaining than valuable, and as Dr. Johnson has said, "a reader not watchful against the power of his infusions would imagine that decussation was the great business of the world, and that nature and art had no other purpose than to exemplify and imitate a quincunx."

Although the "Garden of Cyrus" displays to the fullest extent the fancy of Sir Thomas Browne, it is only in the "Hydriotaphia" that we are brought face to face with his soaring imagination. Some Roman sepulchral urns which were accidentally unearthed in Norfolk furnished our author with the suggestion for this eloquent monody, which, beginning with a historical discussion of ancient modes of burial, soon develops into a solemn homily on death and the vicissitudes of worldly fame. This treatise displays as much of the learning of its author as does the "Garden of Cyrus"; and by the multiplicity of its allusions demonstrates his extraordinary memory, as the work was suddenly called forth by a specific occasion, and was not, like the "Pseudodoxia", compiled from a series of notes made during years of study and observation.

In the half-hazy world of death and sepulchral decay, the imagination of our author lives "like a creature native and indued unto that element." He considers death not merely as the transitory exodus of the soul from the body, but as an enduring state clothed with a majesty peculiarly its own. "Man," he tells us, "is a noble animal, splendid in ashes and pompous in the grave." He tunes his reflections to the echoes of forgotten valedictions, and chants in solemn organ tones about "the famous nations of the dead."

Sir Thomas Browne does not, like so many other authors, confound *death* with *dying*. He treats it not as a fleeting phantasm, but as a substantial reality. While others have been content to follow the departing soul to realms beyond the stars, Sir Thomas broods over the lifeless corpse, and speculates about its "long and aged decay" within the tomb. He is not content to glance over the epitaphs of a churchyard; he sends his delving imagination to insinuate itself into the

mysteries of the grave, and dreams, Hamlet-like, over the skulls and skeletons which it finds there. But there is naught of the body snatcher's maliciousness in Sir Thomas's inquisitive investigations. He handles the dust of long-forgotten men with tender reverence, and meekly wonders "who were the proprietaries of these bones, or what bodies these ashes made up." His firm-founded altruism clings to him even "in the deep discovery of the subterranean world."

The "Hydriotaphia" exhibits in its perfected maturity all of the grandeur of Sir Thomas Browne's style. Many of the periods which flourish in the splendid peroration of the treatise can be likened, in their pompous rhythm and resonant harmony, only to the sonorous tones of a mighty organ. I shall quote some chosen sentences which will exhibit, better than I could explain, the author's impeccable instinct for stately magniloquence of style. He opens his "Epistle Dedicatory" to his friend, Thomas Le Gros, with a solemn sentence which strikes the keynote for the threnody which is to follow:

When the funeral pyre was out, and the last valediction over, men took a lasting adieu of their interred friends, little expecting the curiosity of future ages should comment upon their ashes.

He thus introduces his famous last chapter, with a reflective quietude no less moving because of its reserve:

Now since these dead bones have already outlasted the living ones of Methuselah, and, in a yard under ground and thin walls of clay, outworn all the strong and spacious buildings above it, and quietly rested under the drums and trappings of three conquests, what prince can promise such diuturnity unto his relics? . . . Time, which antiquates antiquities, and hath an art to make dust of all things, hath yet spared these minor monuments.

How eloquent he waxes in his conjectures regarding the identity of the discovered dead!

What song the sirens sang, or what name Achilles assumed when he hid himself among women, though puzzling questions, are not beyond all conjecture. What time the persons of these ossuaries entered the famous nations of the dead, and slept with princes and counsellors, might admit a wide solution. But who were the proprietaries of these bones, or what bodies these ashes made up, were a question above antiquarianism, not to be resolved by man, nor easily perhaps by spirits, except we consult the pro-

vincial guardians or tutelary observers. Had they made as good provision for their names as they have done for their relics, they had not so grossly erred in the art of perpetuation. But to subsist in bones, and be but pyramidally extant, is a fallacy in duration. Vain ashes, which in the oblivion of names, persons, times, and sexes have found unto themselves a fruitless continuation, and only arise unto late posterity as emblems of mortal vanities, antidotes against pride, vainglory, and madding vices.

How charmingly he clothes the simple reflection:

There is no antidote against the opium of time, which temporally considereth all things.

Notice again the following passage:

To be nameless in worthy deeds exceeds an infamous history. The Canaanitish woman lives more happily without a name than Herodias with one. And who had not rather have been the good thief than Pilate? But the iniquity of oblivion blindly scattereth her poppy, and deals with the memory of men without distinction to merit of perpetuity. Who can but pity the founder of the pyramids? Herostratus lives that burned the temple of Diana; he is almost lost that built it. Time hath spared the epitaph of Adrian's horse, confounded that of himself. In vain we compute our felicities by the advantage of our good names, since bad have equal durations, and Thersites is like to live as long as Agamemnon. Who knows whether the best of men be known, or whether there be not more remarkable persons forgot than any that stand remembered in the known account of time? Without the favor of the everlasting register, the first man had been as unknown as the last, and Methuselah's long life had been his only chronicle.

The excellence of this style rests in its eloquent spontaneity rather than in the exhibition of conscious mastery of art. "He fell into an age," says Johnson, "in which our language began to lose the stability which it obtained in the time of Elizabeth; and was considered by every writer as a subject on which he might try his plastic skill by molding it according to his own fancy. Milton, in consequence of this encroaching license, began to introduce the Latin idiom; and Browne, though he gave less disturbance to our structures and phraseology, yet poured in a multitude of exotic words. His style is indeed a tissue of many languages, a mixture of heterogeneous words, brought together from distant regions, with terms originally appropriated to one art, and drawn by violence into the service of another." On the whole, this criticism is not unjust. The hyperlatinism of Browne's style and its capricious uncertainty render it no serviceable model for

the modern writer; but at the same time, the moving inspiration of Sir Thomas's most eloquent passages places him in the foremost rank of the authors of English prose.

If in the "Hydriotaphia" our author revealed to us all of the funeral pomp of *death*, he is no less successful in depicting the more wingy mysteries of *dying*, in his "Letter to a Friend, upon occasion of the death of his intimate friend." It seems that Sir Thomas, in his quality of physician, had attended the deceased young man through the last stages of consumption. In the "Religio Medici" he tells us: "I cannot go to cure the body of my patient but I forget my profession, and call unto God for his soul." And often during his young friend's "deliberate and creeping progress unto the grave" his thoughts were led to float upward, like incense, to heaven. In this "Letter," Sir Thomas treats of death as the "isthmus between this life and a better;" and he feels something profoundly spiritual in "the soft departure" of his patient, "which was scarce an expiration." For days the life of the young man flickered fitfully in his bosom, until at last the lingering flame went out; and "his departure was so like unto sleep that he scarce needed the civil ceremony of closing his eyes."

It may be doubted if any of the works of Sir Thomas Browne exhibits more beautifully than this "Letter" that homely friendliness of his nature which I have selected as his most characteristic quality. We can almost feel the tender touch of his hand as he smoothes the brow of his slowly sinking patient; and we need not listen overintently to hear the sweet melody of his voice as he breathes into the ear of his dying friend the inspiring consolation that, even though the young man is called away before his time, his life has been long in good deeds:

Surely [he says] if we deduct all those days of our life which we might wish un-lived, and which abate the comfort of those we now live; if we reckon up only those days which God hath accepted of our lives—a life of good years will hardly be a span long.

From this point of view, "although his years came short,"

the young man "might have been said to have held up with longer livers."

Sir Thomas closes his "Letter" with a few scattered precepts which he later incorporated in the posthumously published treatise on "Christian Morals." This work, we are told by the author's daughter, Mrs. Littleton, was intended as a continuation of the "Religio Medici," which was published many years before. During this long interval, our author's style has become more cumbersome than it was in his early works. He often allows his taste for Latinisms to run away with him, and sometimes obscures, rather than illuminates, his meaning by his carefully culled epithets. He forces crude classical words into the constricted rhythm of his sentences, and sometimes produces such verbal monstrosities as the following: "Move circumspectly, not meticulously; and rather carefully solicitous than anxiously solicitudinous." The general tone of the work is also lacking in that genial intimacy which captivates us in the "Religio Medici." He wrote the earlier treatise for himself and for a few kindred souls who might chance to overhear his musings; he prepared the other for the general public, and therefore cloaked his reflections in a garb of more dignified reserve. While in the "Religio Medici" he displays a pleasant self-complacency much akin to the genial humor of Montaigne, he assumes in the "Christian Morals" a self-conscious didacticism which more nearly recalls the solemnity of Marcus Aurelius. Much of the friendliness of the "Religio Medici," therefore, disappears in its labored continuation. But this criticism is only comparative, and must not be regarded as belittling the true merit of the "Christian Morals." It abounds in passages of rare eloquence and noble ethical significance, as may easily be seen on perusing some of its choicest sections. Note, for example, this noble panegyric on solitude:

Some schoolmen tell us that he is properly alone, with whom, in the same place, there is no other of the same species. Nebuchadnezzar was alone, though among the beasts of the field; and a wise man may be tolerably said to be alone, though with a rabble of people little better than beasts about him. Unthinking heads, who have not learned to be alone, are in a

prison to themselves if they be not also with others; whereas, on the contrary, they whose thoughts are in a fair and hurry within are sometimes fain to retire into company, to be out of the crowd of themselves. He who must needs have company must needs have bad company. Be able to be alone. Lose not the advantage of solitude and the society of thyself; nor be only content, but delight, to be alone and single with Omnipresency. He who is thus prepared, the day is not uneasy nor the night black unto him. Darkness may bound his eyes, not his imagination. In his bed he may lie, like Pompey and his sons, in all quarters of the earth; may speculate the universe, and enjoy the whole world in the hermitage of himself. Thus the old ascetic Christians found a paradise in a desert, and with little converse on earth held a conversation in heaven; thus they astronomized in caves, and, though they beheld not the stars, had the glory of heaven before them.

Take again these inspiring precepts of self-education:

Let true knowledge and virtue tell the lower world thou art a part of the higher. Let thy thoughts be of things which have not entered into the hearts of beasts; think of things long past and long to come; acquaint thyself with the choragium of the stars, and consider the vast expansion beyond them. Let intellectual tubes give thee a glance of things which visible organs reach not. Have a glimpse of incomprehensibles, and thoughts of things which thoughts but tenderly touch. Lodge immaterials in thy head; ascend unto invisibles; fill thy spirit with spirituals, with the mysteries of faith, the magnalities of religion, and thy life with the honor of God; without which, though giants in wealth and dignity, we are but dwarfs and pygmies in humanity, and may hold a pitiful rank in that triple division of mankind into heroes, men, and beasts.

In this hasty review of the most salient of Sir Thomas Browne's writings, I have purposely violated chronology to reserve until the last the greatest of them all, the famous "*Religio Medici*." In this treatise, which combines the meditations of many leisure hours, he has poured all of the emotional affluence of his soul. The work shows him to have been of a nature essentially religious, in the restricted sense of the term, rather than of a merely ethical cast of mind. It is an incarnation of the religious mood, and a contribution to piety rather than to free thinking. Sir Thomas, with all of his breadth of mind, is hardly content to worship under the open firmament; his emotional soul loves to hear the rumbling notes of the organ thrilling their way along the fretted arches of some vast cathedral. While he steadfastly maintains his loyalty to the Anglican Church, there is much that appeals to him in the more mystical ceremonials of the Ro-

man Catholics. Sometimes more than a generous tolerance of others' beliefs leads him to say, "I could never hear the Ave-mary bell without an elevation," and to confess, "At a solemn procession I have wept abundantly, while my consorts, blind with opposition and prejudice, have fallen into an excess of scorn and laughter."

Sir Thomas's habitual point of view is that of an active faith. To his mind, atheism is impossible; and he even regrets that it is so easy to believe the mysteries of religion:

As for those wingy mysteries in divinity, and airy subtleties in religion, which have unhinged the brains of better heads, they never stretched the *pia mater* of mine. Methinks there be not impossibilities enough in religion for an active faith. The deepest mysteries ours contains have not only been illustrated, but maintained, by syllogism and the rule of reason. I love to lose myself in a mystery, to pursue my reason to an *O altitudo!* 'Tis my solitary recreation to pose my apprehension with those involved enigmas and riddles of the Trinity—incarnation and resurrection. I can answer all the objections of Satan and my rebellious reason with that odd resolution I learned of Tertullian: *Certum est quia impossibile est.* I desire to exercise my faith in the difficultest point; for to credit ordinary and visible objects is not faith, but persuasion. Some believe the better for seeing Christ's sepulchre, and, when they have seen the Red Sea, doubt not of the miracle. Now, contrarily, I bless myself, and am thankful that I lived not in the days of miracles; that I never saw Christ nor his disciples. I would not have been one of those Israelites that passed the Red Sea; nor one of Christ's patients, on whom he wrought his wonders; then had my faith been thrust upon me, nor should I enjoy that greater blessing pronounced to all that believe and saw not. 'Tis an easy and necessary belief to credit what our eye and sense hath examined. I believe he was dead, and buried, and rose again; and desire to see him in his glory rather than to contemplate him in his cenotaph or sepulchre. Nor is this much to believe; as we have reason, we owe this faith unto history; they only had the advantage of a bold and noble faith who lived before his coming, who, upon obscure prophecies and mystical types, could raise a belief and expect apparent impossibilities.

This serene repose of faith leads him at times to undue instances of credulity. I have already spoken of his belief in witches, and of his unwillingness to accept the Copernican system of astronomy because it contradicted the literal statements of the Hebrew Scriptures. Among his other peculiar beliefs may be numbered his idea that more than half of the world's course had been run and that the day was rapidly approaching when the whole world would be consumed by fire. He tells us, furthermore, that there is no salvation except

through Christ; and he believes in the resurrection, not only of the soul but of the body, on the day of the final judgment. The argument with which he lends color to this last tenet is, to be sure, very effective:

Many things [he says] are true in divinity which are neither inducible by reason nor confirmable by sense; and many things in philosophy confirmable by sense, yet not inducible by reason. Thus it is impossible, by any solid or demonstrative reasons, to persuade a man to believe the conversion of the needle to the north, though this be possible and true, and easily credible upon a single experiment unto the sense.

But whatever smallness we may find in the religion of Sir Thomas Browne must be ascribed not to the man, but rather to the age in which he lived. To a childlike credulity he united a broad tolerance of differing creeds hardly to be expected in the age of Puritanism. His religion is at once more personal and more universal than the common dogmas of the Church. It consists not so much in the accumulation of traditional forms as in the spontaneous upwellings of his personal soul. Sir Thomas's creed is a world-religion, for the very reason that it is so individualized. It is serviceable for many men, because it is so supremely applicable to one. Sir Thomas, far from being that absent and solitary dreamer that many have pictured him to be, feels himself akin to the whole world. His altruism is all the more touching because of its evident sincerity. No mean mind could have uttered the serene simplicity of thoughts like these:

I cannot contentedly frame a prayer for myself in particular without a catalogue of my friends, nor request a happiness wherein my sociable disposition doth not desire the fellowship of my neighbor. I never hear the toll of a passing bell, though in my mirth, without my prayers and best wishes for the departing spirit. . . . I cannot see one say his prayers but, instead of imitating him, I fall into supplication for him, who perhaps is no more to me than a common nature; and if God hath vouchsafed an ear to my supplications, there are surely many happy that never saw me and enjoy the blessing of mine unknown devotions.

While Mr. Symonds is correct in characterizing Sir Thomas Browne as the man-of-letters' prosaist, there is nothing pedantic in his make-up. He feels no inordinate pride in his scholarly attainments, and employs his learning for others' benefit as well as for his own. He deeply feels the lasting

ties which link him to his fellow-men, and even enjoys a sense of mystical communion with the invisible spirits of the universe, among whom not the least is that great world-soul of which he speaks in these eloquent terms:

This is that gentle heat that brooded upon the waters, and in six days hatched the world; this is that irradiation that dispels the mists of hell, the clouds of horror, fear, sorrow, despair, and preserves the region of the mind in serenity. Whosoever feels not the warm gale and the gentle ventilation of this spirit (though I feel his pulse), I dare not say he lives; for truly without this, to me, there is no heat under the tropic, nor any light, though I dwelt in the body of the sun.

We come away from the perusal of the "*Religio Medici*" intoxicated with Sir Thomas Browne's belief in the bigness of man. I know of no more eloquent assertion of human greatness than the sublime passage which follows:

Now for my life, it is a miracle of thirty years, which to relate were not a history, but a piece of poetry, and would sound to common ears like a fable. For the world, I count it not an inn, but an hospital, and a place not to live but to die in. The world that I regard is myself; it is the microcosm of my own frame that I cast mine eye on; for the other, I use it but like my globe, and turn it round sometimes for my recreation. Men that look upon my outside, perusing only my conditions and fortunes, do err in my altitude; for I am above Atlas's shoulders. The earth is a point not only in respect of the heavens above us, but of that heavenly and celestial part within us. That mass of flesh that circumscribes me limits not my mind. That surface that tells the heavens it hath an end cannot persuade me I have any. I take my circle to be above three hundred and sixty. Though the number of the arc do measure my body, it comprehendeth not my mind. Whilst I study to find how I am a microcosm, or little world, I find myself something more than the great. There is surely a piece of divinity in us—something that was before the elements, and owes no homage unto the sun. Nature tells me I am the image of God, as well as Scripture. He that understands not thus much hath not his introduction or first lesson, and is yet to begin the alphabet of man.

With these eloquent words still ringing in our ears, it is fitting that we close this chronicle of the life and writings of Sir Thomas Browne. His position in our literature is not easy to assign, because of his aloofness from the main current of our literary development. As a master of lordly and pompous rhetoric, he has hardly a peer in the history of English prose. He possesses an errant fancy, a soaring imagination, a rich and majestic rhythm, and a stately sonority of tone. His vocabulary is as varied as it is extensive, and his

figures are original, unexpected, and extraordinarily effective. With all of his polish, he never becomes tinged with the florid gloss of such prosaists as Jeremy Taylor. His style beams with the placid serenity of the moonlight, rather than with the dancing scintillance of the evening star.

With all its excellence, however, his style is hyperlatinated, overparadoxical, chaotic, fitful, and capricious. He has none of that artful correctness which later characterized the prose of Addison and Swift. He followed no master in his use of English, and he founded no school. He stands entirely by himself, serenely alone.

But whatever he was as a stylist, there can be no doubt of his greatness as a man. Whimsical as he often is, fond as he is of indulging in overfanciful conjectures, he yet possesses all of the reverence of a mighty soul. His was a heart too generous to stoop to meanness, too cheerful to be tainted with melancholy, too genial to be constricted by selfish narrowness. In his own day, no one could know him without loving him; and now, after the lapse of centuries, no sensitive soul can read his works without feeling that he has found a friend.

“He was a man, take him for all in all,
We shall not look upon his like again.”

CLAYTON M. HAMILTON